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ABSTRACT

This digest is intended to help parents prevent child sexual abuse. The digest provides facts about child sexual abuse and guidelines for dealing with abuse. Sections of the digest address the following questions: (1) What is child sexual abuse? (2) Could my child be sexually abused, and if so, by whom? (3) How would I know if my child is being sexually abused? (4) If my child reveals sexual abuse, what should I do? (5) Can I deal with sexual abuse in my family without contacting the authorities? (6) What will happen to the child and the offender if sexual abuse is reported? and (7) What can parents do to prevent sexual abuse? Resources for further information are listed. (RH)

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ERIC Digest

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Child Sexual Abuse: What It Is and How to Prevent It

Sexual abuse of children is a grim fact of life in our society. It is more common than most people realize. Some surveys say that at least 1 out of 5 women and 1 out of 10 men recall sexual abuse in childhood.

Parents need not feel helpless about the problem. The American Academy of Pediatrics provides the following information to help prevent child sexual abuse.

What is child sexual abuse?

It is any sexual act with a child that is performed by an adult or an older child. Such acts include fondling the child's genitals, getting the child to fondle an adult's genitals, mouth to genital contact, rubbing an adult's genitals on the child, or actually penetrating the child's vagina or anus.

Other, often overlooked, forms of abuse occur. These include an adult showing his or her genitals to a child, showing the child obscene pictures or videotapes, or using the child to make obscene materials.

Could my child be sexually abused? By whom?

Boys and girls are most often abused by adults or older children whom they know and who can control them. The offender is known by the victim in 8 out of 10 reported cases. The offender is often an authority figure whom the child trusts or loves. Almost always the child is convinced to engage in sex by means of persuasion, bribes or threats.

How would I know if my child is being sexually abused?

You hope that if your child is abused, the child will tell you or someone else about the abuse. Yet, children who are being abused often have been convinced by the abuser that they must not tell anyone about it. A child's first statements about abuse may be sketchy and incomplete. He may only hint about the problem. Some abused children may tell friends about the abuse. A child who is told about or sees abuse in another child may tell an adult.

Parents need to be aware of behavioral changes that may signal this problem. The following symptoms may suggest sexual abuse:

- striking, exceptional fear of a person or certain places,
- an uncalled-for response from a child when the child is asked if he has been touched by someone,
- unreasonable fear of a physical exam,
- drawings that are scary or use a lot of black and red,
- abrupt change in conduct of any sort,
- sudden awareness of genitals and sexual acts and words, and
- attempts to get other children to perform sexual acts.

Physical signs of abuse include sexually transmitted diseases, such as gonorrhea or herpes. In an exam, a doctor may notice genital or anal changes indicative of abuse.

If my child reveals sexual abuse, what should I do?

Above all, take it seriously, but stay calm. Many children who report abuse are not believed. When a child's plea is ignored, she may not risk telling again. As a result, the child could be victimized for months or years. Millions of children have had their lives torn apart by ongoing sexual abuse.

Make sure you help your child understand that the abuse is not his or her fault. Give lots of love and comfort. If you are angry, don't let your child see it—you do not want the child to think the anger is aimed at her. Let the child know how brave she was to tell you. This is most important if the child has been abused by a close relative or a family friend. Then, tell someone yourself. Get help. Talk to your child's doctor, a counselor, a policeman, a child protective service worker, or a teacher.

Can I deal with sexual abuse in my family without contacting the authorities?

It is difficult for parents to stop sexual abuse without help from experts. The hard but healthy way to deal with the problem is:

1. Face the issue.
2. Take charge of the situation.
3. Work to avoid future abuse.
4. Discuss it with your pediatrician, who can provide support and counseling.
5. Report abuse to your local child protection service agency and ask about crisis support help.

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Talking about sexual abuse can be very hard for the child who has been told not to tell by a trusted adult. It can be just as hard for adults if the abuser is close to them. Still, the abuse should be reported to your local child protection agency or your doctor. It is the best thing to do for both the child and the family.

What will happen to the child and the offender if sexual abuse is reported?

Cases are checked by the police or a social service agency that looks into reports of suspected child abuse. With the help of a doctor, the police or social service will decide whether sexual abuse has taken place. Sometimes, the police will let social services handle the case. This may occur if the child is not physically abused and the abuser is a family member. When a child is abused by a non-family member, the matter is usually handled by the police.

After the case is reported, what happens depends on the circumstances. The degree of risk of additional abuse to the child is of first concern to the authorities. The offender or the entire family may be required to attend a treatment program. In some cases, the offender may face criminal charges. If the child's safety is in question, he may be removed from the home. In any event, the child and family will need a great deal of support from relatives and friends.

What can parents do to prevent sexual abuse?

Stay alert to sexual abuse and teach your children what it is. Tell them they can and should say *No!* or *Stop!* to adults who threaten them sexually. Make sure your children know that it's OK to tell you about any attempt to molest them—no matter who the offender is.

The American Academy of Pediatrics encourages you to take the following steps:

- See if your child's school has an abuse prevention program for teachers and children. If it doesn't, get one started.
- Talk to your child about sexual abuse. A good time to do this is when your child's school is sponsoring a sexual abuse program.
- Teach your child about the privacy of body parts.
- Listen when your child tries to tell you something, especially when it seems hard for her to talk about it.
- Give your child enough of your time so that the child will not seek attention from other adults.
- Know with whom your child is spending time. Be careful about letting your child spend time in out-of-the-way places with other adults or older children. Plan to visit your child's caregiver without notice.
- Tell someone in authority if you suspect that your child or someone else's child is being abused.

Prevention measures to safeguard your children should begin early, since a number of child abuse cases involve preschoolers. The following guidelines offer age-appropriate topics to discuss with your children:

- 18 months—Teach your child the proper names for body parts.
- 3-5 years—Teach your child about private parts of the body and how to say *no* to sexual advances. Give straightforward answers about sex.
- 5-8 years—Discuss safety away from home and the difference between *good touch* and *bad touch*. Encourage your child to talk about scary experiences.
- 8-12 years—Stress personal safety. Start to discuss rules of sexual conduct that are accepted by the family.
- 13-18 years—Stress personal safety. Discuss rape, date rape, sexually transmitted diseases, and unintended pregnancy.

Your child's teacher, school counselor, or pediatrician can help you teach your child to avoid sexual abuse. They know how this can be done without making your child unduly upset or tearful. For further information on child sexual abuse and other forms of abuse, write to the National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse, P.O. Box 2866, Chicago, IL 60690.

Your pediatrician understands the importance of communication between parents and children. Your doctor is trained to detect the signs of child sexual abuse. Ask your pediatrician for advice on ways to protect your children.

This ERIC digest was adapted from the flyer *Child Sexual Abuse: What It Is and How to Prevent It*, copyright c 1988 American Academy of Pediatrics.

For more information:

Heath, Kathleen C., and Donald W. Irvine. *What Educators Need to Know about Child Abuse*. 1988. ERIC Document number 303 728.

National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect. *Study Findings: Study of National Incidence and Prevalence of Child Abuse and Neglect*. Washington, DC, 1988. ERIC Document number 310 613.

Or contact the Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect and Family Violence, P.O. Box 1182, Washington, DC 20013. Phone: 703-821-2086.

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